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Aloneness and the Complicated Selves of Donald M. Murray

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This article examines Donald M. Murray’s ideas about what he considered the essential solitude of all writing and what happens within that solitude. Murray, a pioneer of the process and modern expressivism movements in composition, identified a number of forces that he felt were at work within his mind whenever he wrote; this complicated aloneness strongly influenced his model of writing and his pedagogy. The author links Murray’s aloneness both to the rhetorical self theorized by Jean Nienkamp and to postmodern ideas about self and identity.

Writers must be comfortable with aloneness; free of guilt at delight in our own company.

—Donald M. Murray, “One Writer’s Curriculum” (17)

As I write this, it is more than four years since Don Murray’s death, and two decades since he grumbled in print that some already considered his work “dated, yesterday’s news, old fashioned” and even “quaint” (“Our Students Will Write” 87, qtd. in Ballenger 297). If they did, it is easy to see why. Composition had taken “the social turn” in the 1980s, focusing, as John Trimbur puts it, on the act of writing as “a cultural activity by which writers position and reposition themselves in relation to their own and others’ subjectivities, discourses, practices and institutions” (109). Murray, however, continued to explore what seemed to happen inside the lone writer’s head, and to insist that each student be treated as a real writer who could learn to control the writing. In simplistic terms, the aging pioneer of process and modern expressivism seemed stuck there, even as our discipline moved on to a post-process paradigm recognizing the limits of individual will and awareness, emphasizing the importance of culture and context, and confronting the socially constructed nature of knowledge and identity.

Yet as I re-read Murray today, I am struck by how well his descriptions of the often struggling, always solitary writer align with some quite current ideas about the nature of self—ideas not generally associated with Murray, expressivism or process. These ideas take various forms, including notions of divided, multiple or flexible selves. Their common trait is a rejection of the unified and essentially rational self presumed in much of philosophy since the Enlightenment (powell). This is the self of Descartes, Kant, and Locke, among others. While there never was unanimous acceptance of the model,
it was Freud who, in a sense, split the atomistic self when he theorized that it had two components: the generally logical conscious and the desiring, instinctive unconscious (Powell). Decades later, the reverberations were still being felt, as Tod Sloan explains in a 1994 article published in this journal:

As the observations of psychoanalysts and psychiatrists became more widely available, [the] view of the self as coherent could no longer be affirmed. We became aware of the fissures, contradictions, fragments, and splits within the psyche. Furthermore, the fields of cultural anthropology and linguistics joined psychoanalysis in demonstrating that the psyche is hardly autonomous but rather a socioculturally and linguistically constituted entity. While numerous other factors played a role in this conceptual transition, considerations such as these planted the seeds for a variety of current postmodern visions of the self that emphasize its incoherence and cultural situatedness. (111)

While academics and philosophers moved to this newer view, the modernist unified self has remained “regnant” in general society (Meyers), where multiple selves traditionally have been associated with disorder. The situation, however, may be changing. In an article on the science of happiness and pleasure, Bloom reports that “[m]any researchers now believe, to varying degrees, that each of us is a community of competing selves” and concludes that “[w]e benefit, intellectually and personally, from the interplay between different selves. . .” (92).

Postmodern ideas of self are tied, in our discipline, to both the social turn and post-process. In his introduction to an anthology on post-process theory, Thomas Kent writes that it has three underlying “assumptions about the act of writing: (1) writing is public; (2) writing is interpretive; and (3) writing is situated” (1). As a public act, writing is always undertaken by a language user who is in some relation to other language users; it is never undertaken by a rational Cartesian self separate from an observed reality. As an interpretive act, writing is never the simple transfer of encoded information between autonomous individuals; it always involves an evolving, interpretive “relation of understanding with other language users” (2). These language users are always situated; they can never extricate themselves from their time or place or community, and so these “outside” factors are always present in (what feels like) their “inner” thoughts. The self presumed in post-process theory, and in composition generally since the social turn, is the complicated self of postmodernism.

Murray’s own notions of self emerge most clearly in the complicated solitude that runs like a dark thread through his writings. Aloneness is foregrounded in his autobiographical work: the central feature of a childhood in a dysfunctional family, a frequent retreat in adulthood, a feeling of observant separation in social situations. Aloneness, too, is a key attribute of the composition process that Murray describes in his articles and books. All writers write alone, he contends; they are “explorers of inner space” whose
first mission isn’t to communicate with others, but rather “to discover what they have to say” (“The Explorers” 908). His emphasis on the self-guided, solitary writer has left Murray particularly vulnerable to at least two criticisms of process and expressivist pedagogies in general. First, as noted above, the idea of a self-aware, self-sufficient writer rationally choosing her thoughts and how to express them is, from a post-process or postmodern view, simply naïve. Second, Murray’s emphasis on introspection in the composition course can be interpreted as downplaying the effort needed to produce good writing—however such writing might be defined.

In this essay I will explore the image of the self that emerges in the aloneness Murray considered so essential to composition, and in the forces he identified within that aloneness. His solitude turns out to be an interesting place—a writing factory in which two “selves” cooperate and contend as they produce a text, the text itself learns to think and talk and teach, and ghosts watch from the shadows. I seek, first, to better understand Murray, a professional writer who helped lead the charge for composition courses focused on the writing process and “authentic” expression. Even in these arguably post-process times, his influence can be seen. Hundreds of writing courses feature elements of the pedagogy that Murray and others have advocated: a concern for personal voice, an emphasis on rewriting, and use of the student-teacher writing conference. If aloneness is such a crucial part of Murray’s model of the writing process, then a better understanding of it may be important to our discipline. Second, I hope to do some theoretical bridgework between Murray’s aloneness and one of the more intriguing views of the individual subject: what Jean Nienkamp has theorized as the “rhetorical self” (127). This link, I propose, helps to explain Murray’s “speculations” on how writing happens and to ground it in theory. Finally, I suggest that a fuller understanding of Murray’s aloneness should cause us to reconsider some of the labels we have applied to him, and can be used in the classroom to help teachers address the influence of social context and to emphasize the disciplined work that writing requires.

Responses to earlier versions of this essay have made me aware of two distinct cohorts within my audience. There are those who were in composition during the 1980s or earlier, when his influence was greatest. They read him; they read about him; they discussed him. Whether they generally agree or disagree with Murray, they feel they know him. In addressing this cohort, I seek mainly to complicate Murray and to suggest that they reconsider and perhaps re-label him. The other audience consists of those who came to composition more recently, and it is quite possible that many in this group are only vaguely aware of Murray. For them, I seek to encourage the same complex understanding of Murray, but my task involves providing more background than the seasoned cohort might want. For both groups, this exploration of Murray must begin by picking up the dark thread of his aloneness where he tells us it began: in his lonely childhood.
“Trained to Aloneness”

In his 2001 memoir My Twice-Lived Life, Murray traces many of the characteristics of his adult life to the experiences of childhood. “[T]here may have been moments when my parents felt joy, love, satisfaction, completeness in me, but I was not aware of a single time. I was a responsibility to them, a duty, an obligation, a burden . . .” (152). Responsibility was not his parents’ strong suit: “We lived a life of dignified fraud on loans and gifts and charges against friends’ department store accounts. . . . When I was a boy we never paid anything on time or in full” (18). He recalls the shame of being enlisted in their deceptions, coached to lie to his father’s employer for a salary advance (18) and to the landlord when the rent came due (20). Meanwhile, his parents took their angers and frustrations out on him. Murray recalls beatings from the age of four (4) until he grew tall enough as a teenager “to tell my father that if he hit me again, I would coldcock him” (37). His father and an uncle used a leather shaving strap for these beatings; his mother used “the back of her bone hairbrush, wetting it so it would hurt more” (43). There were other types of physical abuse. His mother sometimes shoved cut-down bars of Ivory soap up his rectum. “She told me, with grim satisfaction, that it would cure—or prevent—constipation” (37). Murray describes his mother as an unhappy, emotionally ill woman who “constantly ridiculed her only child’s appearance. He was, in turn, too fat, too thin, too fat, too thin, then finally, in adulthood, too fat. He slumped, dressed funny, mumbled, was funny looking” (148). His father worked most often in department stores, was frequently fired, but always had big plans. He once opened his own store, which failed. Over and over, Murray learned that he could not trust these parents for honesty, let alone support. When in his early teens Murray got a job at a local grocery, he found his parents’ names on the “bad-debt, give-no-credit list,” and when he asked for his first 50-cent pay, he was told his mother had already borrowed against it (21). He saved $600 from various jobs as a youth, but discovered that his mother had emptied his bank account (135). She did the same thing later with the Army pay he saved during World War II (120).

Murray was a sickly child. During many convalescences, he would “lie abed reading, listening to soap operas on the radio, drawing and writing, . . . making believe, drifting from sleep to wake and back so that the line between night dream and daydream blurred” (64). Even when healthy, he was an only child in a house filled with the tension of two parents who “lived a life of rage” (142). He was often left with only his imagination for companionship: “I secretly lived with a family in the wall where I had brothers and sisters, young parents, real dogs, and a life far different from mine” (62). He became comfortable with solitude. “I am surprised, reliving my childhood in memory, how happy I was to be left alone and, once trained to aloneness, how all my best memories are of being by myself” (65).
Murray’s childhood shaped him in profound ways, three of which echo strongly in his views of the composition process. First, it taught him self-reliance, and gave him the work ethic that would keep him from depending on others. He wrote of pride that he could do “grown-up jobs” (207) as a teen. A dropout and flunkout from high school (32), he later finished on his own and put himself through junior college and the University of New Hampshire. He became a celebrated writer, yet attributed his success more to his work ethic than to any writing abilities. “Early on I knew how to work. I didn’t know if I had the talent to be the writer I wanted to be. I did know it was hard work to make writing come easy . . . I could plant my rump in the writer’s chair and keep it there . . .” (72). As we shall see, this emphasis on self-directed hard work would become a keystone of his writing pedagogy.

Murray’s childhood also left him with a central loneness, a mental separation from others that took the form of self-conscious distance in social situations and comfortable introspection in solitude. He tells of a “childhood ability to detach myself from my family” (5). In adulthood he sought solitude often, as during a family Thanksgiving celebration when his daughter found him “standing alone on her porch between the turkey and the pie courses, fleeing to aloneness” (67). Murray diagnoses a contradiction within himself: a self-described shy person who would “work the room” at a local restaurant, who taught, gave speeches and even hosted television shows: “[T]he public Don Murray must be a natural me at some level, but that person was cultivated, and I was never quite comfortable in his skin” (66-67). This idea of two selves within one mind will also appear in Murray’s theory of composition.

A habit of observing others and chronicling what he sees and feels is the third legacy; this loner who feels so separated from others is not uninterested in them. He describes himself in the memoir as “a writer who always has part of his mind at a distance, observing, taking note . . .” (175). He also writes of this compulsion in The Lively Shadow, which recounts the death of his middle daughter, Lee. “As a child in an uncomfortable family full of tension and silence, I became a watcher early on. . . . I know that my training as a reporter began before I could even read the paper” (60). As Lee is dying of Reye’s Syndrome, Murray can not “stop myself from taking notes, but I feel guilty” (61).

Murray grew up to be a professional writer, first as newspaper reporter and Pulitzer Prize-winning editorialist, next as a staffer for Time magazine, then as a free-lancer and ghostwriter. At the age of 39 Murray accepted an invitation to teach writing and start the journalism department at his alma mater, the University of New Hampshire. Over the next four decades, he would develop and explain an influential model of how writing happens and how it should be taught. As I next explore that model, we shall see how personal it is.
Murray on Writing

“I do not see writing from the exterior view but from within my own mind and my own emotions as I try to write every single day of my life,” Murray declares in 1970 (“The Interior View” 21). Twenty-four years later, he laments that some have interpreted his inward observations as more than what he meant them to be: “From the beginning it was clear to me that my answers were speculations—guesses. Informed guesses but not TRUTHS.” (“Knowing Not Knowing” 61-62). These speculations changed over the years, he notes unapologetically, as his view of his own writing process changed. “I have not been restricted by any need for consistency,” he explains (A Writer Teaches Writing 9).

Yet certain principles of his model of writing never changed, and in reaching them he builds outward from his own experience to a general model. Regarding motivation, Murray feels “I write because I must” (“One Writer's Curriculum” 18), and so he reasons that all writers “are compelled to write to see what their words tell them” (“Teach the Motivating Force” 56). Regarding error, Murray finds that, in his own revisions, “I did not so much correct error as develop what worked”; he concludes that writing instruction, too, should move the focus from fixing what’s wrong to expanding what’s right (“Teaching the Other Self” 146). A third example can be seen in his depiction of mental solitude—even in a crowd—as central to the writing process. “At the moment of writing the writer has a fundamental aloneness,” Murray writes. His evidence:

Although I have written in the city room, suffered group journalism at Time, worked with a collaborator, I have always found that at the center of the process I am alone with the blank page, struggling to discover what I know so I can know what to say (“The Interior View” 22).

Solitude also must be a part of the writing curriculum, he contends: “This then is what we must give our students: insulation from the external world, time to be with themselves, instruction in reflection” (“One Writer's Curriculum” 17). The aloneness that Murray contends is central to writing is also central to my project today, and I turn to a fuller description of it next.

The Aloneness of Writing

Early in his teaching career, Murray lays out his understanding of the writing process in 1970's “The Interior View: One Writer’s Philosophy of Composition.” He emphasizes the solitary nature of writing, and some of his statements seem to indicate that Murray sees writing as the straightforward, unilateral act of a person pursuing a goal. Murray first posits a one-sentence statement meant “to capture the essential process of writing . . .: A writer is an individual who uses language to discover meaning in experience and communicate it” (21). Later, Murray offers a statement meant to illustrate “what the student writer should go through” in the composition course: “A
student writer is an individual who is learning to use language to discover meaning in experience and communicate it” (24). In both statements, note Murray’s choice of “an individual” as the predicate nominative. If these statements define writer and student writer, they leave no room for collaboration; co-authorship would not be writing. The statements do not address issues of social context at all, leaving readers to conclude that he does not consider such issues important. In fact, the only reference to anyone other than the lone writer is merely implied: to the reader or readers to whom the writer communicates.

In dissecting these statements, Murray paints a writer with power, purpose, and agency: “The good writer . . . must be self-centered,” alone deciding which criticisms and traditions to accept and which to reject (22). The writer uses language as a “living tool” wielded “to lead him [sic] to understanding” (22). Murray grants the student writer similar license: “[T]he writing course should have one central purpose: to allow the student to use language to explore his [sic] world” (24).

Yet even in this portrait of the solitary, seemingly unconflicted writer crafting and controlling the writing, Murray adds two brush strokes that hint at something more complex. Here is the first: “During the process of writing the writer has, in a sense, been communicating with himself” (23, emphasis added). Since communication involves the sending and receiving of some message, and here it happens within the writer, then the writer is playing both roles—sender and receiver. In the next sentence, Murray suggests the presence of another actor on the stage: “And if the words on the writer’s page reveal the writer’s meaning to himself through language, the writer then can reveal what he has discovered to others . . .” (23, emphasis added) Meaning is revealed through writing, but this sentence states that it is being revealed to rather than by the writer. And who or what initiates these revelations? On its own, the second sentence indicates the words are doing the revealing. If the sentences are considered together, Murray’s implication is that the words are more than intermediaries in the communication—that something is communicated from the writer, through the words, to the writer. The writer gets back more than she sent out; the self-communication yields new meaning. These two sentences merely hint that Murray sees any complex communication going on during the writing process. For stronger evidence I turn elsewhere, first regarding what Murray means by the writer “communicating with himself,” then regarding the question of what the written words do to the writer.

Murray most fully explains the intrapersonal communication of writing in 1982’s “Teaching the Other Self: The Writer’s First Reader.” Here he leaves no doubt that he sees the communication as an interaction between two separate quasi-beings—the self and the other self—each with its own essential job:
The act of writing might be described as a conversation between two workmen muttering to each other at the workbench. The self speaks, the other self listens and responds. The self proposes, the other self considers. The self makes, the other self evaluates. The two selves collaborate . . . (140).

Of the two, he sees the self’s role as more straightforward. The self does what most people think of as writing: coming up with ideas, choosing form and language, plowing ahead with the task. But Murray believes that to produce good writing, the self needs the other self to fulfill its more complex roles. The other self is the writing self’s “first reader,” providing “a sophisticated reading that monitors writing before it is made, as it is made, and after it is made” (141). The other self tracks the writing from a distance that allows evaluation, and provides feedback as both “critic” and “supportive colleague” (142). Yet the other self must also precede the writer, acting as “an explorer, a map-maker,” tracing a trail “between where the writer is and where the writer intended to go” (141).

Murray sees the other self as enormously important in the writing course. The teacher’s primary job is to bring the other self into existence (143), make it articulate, and help the writing self learn to heed its counsel. Murray’s pedagogy is based on the one-to-one writing conference, and in this article he shows that the teacher deals with both the student’s self and other self during conferences. “When the student speaks and the student and the teacher listen, they are both informed about the nature of the writing process that produced the draft” (143), he writes. Clearly, at any moment either the student’s self or other self is talking, and the other is listening (along with the teacher). During the writing course, the teacher’s job is not to determine the path to better writing, but instead to “stand behind the young explorer, pointing out alternatives only at the moment of panic” (142). Eventually, “the other self can take over the function of teacher” (143). Though both the creative self and the critical other self are integral to Murray’s writing process, he warns in A Writer Teaches Writing that they sometimes pull the student in opposite directions. “It is the task of the writing teacher to monitor this tug of war, to encourage the creator or the critic at the appropriate time, to make it possible for the writer within the writer’s own self to learn how to deal with these dual forces” (149).

Murray’s solitude becomes even more crowded in “One Writer’s Curriculum,” in which he likens his writing to daily attendance at “a one-room, one-person school house . . . where I am both teacher and student . . .” (16). As he composes in this school house, Murray feels the presence of an audience of “companion readers”—real people he knows or has known—“standing in the corner of my mind,” watching and subtly influencing the writing:

At the beginning of each day’s lesson I am alone but as I write my classroom is packed with the living and the dead, those I know will laugh at this line, grow sad at that one, nod at the significant detail, appreciate how this line turns, how that word surprises. (20)
The process of writing, as Murray describes it, includes yet another active participant: the text itself, the revelatory words on the writer’s page. Murray repeatedly describes what is being written as something with voice and will. He declares that writers “are compelled to write to see what their words tell them” (“Teach the Motivating Force” 56) and that student writers should be taught to hear “the whisper of the emerging text” and see how it is “pointing the way toward meaning” (“One Writer’s Curriculum” 17). Murray is most explicit about the seeming independence and intelligence of the text in *A Writer Teaches Writing*. He portrays the writing conference as “a triadialogue between student, teacher, and text” in which the text plays an equal, and sometimes dominating, role. “The evolving text is itself learning during the conference. In a very real sense, it is discovering its own meaning” (150). The co-reading of the text in conference, Murray writes, “demystifies one of the most mysterious feelings that the writer has: that the text talks to the writer and tells the writer what to do and what not to do” (151).

These descriptions show us that when Murray finds aloneness in which to write, he is alone only in the physical sense. In another sense, the exterior quiet allows him to call to order, observe, and participate in a purposive meeting of forces within his mind. Three of these forces—the creative self, the critical/evaluative/supportive other self, and the emerging, increasingly powerful text—constitute a quorum. Murray feels writing can not happen without interaction among all three. For Murray personally, this interplay also is influenced by his “companion readers,” the spirits of real individuals whom he imagines to be watching and evaluating the writing as it happens. In the composition course, the teacher also plays a role, coaching the student writer to “hear” what the other self and the text are saying.

I note here that while solitude is a necessary condition for Murray’s model of writing, it is not in itself sufficient. He emphasizes that this crucible won’t produce meaning unless the writer first gathers necessary raw material: “Effective writing is produced from an abundance of specific information. The writer needs an inventory of facts, observations, details, images, quotations, statistics—all sorts of information—from which to choose when building an effective piece of writing” (*A Writer Teaches Writing* 10). “Lack of development—an insufficient amount of information—is the writer’s primary problem.” (“Teach the Motivating Force” 59)

**Regarding Theory**

As discussed above, Murray is most strongly associated with two overlapping encampments on the terrain of composition theory: process and expressivism (or expressionism, as some prefer). Most histories of these movements (e.g., Gradin, Tobin) identify Murray as a pioneer and influential proponent of both. He is, of course, one of the first to call for a process approach to composition—turning the primary attention away from what the final, cleaned-up product should look like, and instead focusing on the messy, recursive activity of composing itself. As Murray argues, “Instead of
teaching finished writing, we should teach unfinished writing, and glory in its unfinishedness” (“Teach Writing as a Process” 15). Murray never calls himself an expressivist, yet his insistence on each student finding her own path to meaning and authentic expression places him at expressivism’s core—so much so that Irene Ward refers to his “reputation among many scholars as the model expressivist” (21).

Modern expressivism and process began in the classroom—as revolutions against the way composition was being taught—and even some leaders of the movements admit they were short on theory at first. Tobin recalls returning to graduate school in the early 1980s, a time when the process movement had been on the ascendancy for more than a decade. Process-based pedagogies were already popular, he writes, but they “hardly represented a theoretically consistent or unified approach” (8). Thus, Tobin wasn’t alone in committing to the movement with “an experiential, empirical belief in process but no real scholarly basis for my approach” (8). And if some early process believers were complacent regarding theory, early expressivists were downright averse to it, according to Burnham. “Expressivists distrusted theory because it often distracted attention from students and teaching” (28), he recalls.

So, Murray’s pedagogy can be regarded as undertheorized in part because of the expressivist and process-focused company he keeps. Yet Murray brings it on himself, too—by emphasizing the subjective and speculative nature of his observations, by publishing scholarly works with few or no references, and especially by emphasizing the contradictions he professes. His titles advise writers to “Write Before Writing” and to be comfortable with “Knowing Not Knowing.” Below the titles lurks more apparent illogic, as in his landmark “The Listening Eye,” in which he declares that the less he teaches, the more his students learn (14); that his role is “teaching my students what they’ve just learned” and “trying not to interfere with their learning” (16); that he doesn’t know how to correct most papers (17); and that he has “to fight the tendency to think I know the subject I teach” (18).

Murray, the former journalist, reports extensively on the complicated aloneness of writing, but generally leaves it up to others to decide whether his “speculations” fit within more formal theory. This is an important consideration. If his aloneness doesn’t “fit” theoretically, then it can be dismissed as nothing more than the subjective testimony of one writer. If, on the other hand, there is a theoretical fit, then the theory offers a foundation for others to build upon Murray’s “informed guesses.” I next propose one such fit: to the “rhetorical self” theorized by Nienkamp.

Internal Rhetorics

Nienkamp’s Internal Rhetorics: Toward a History and Theory of Self-Persuasion begins with the common notion that we all “talk to ourselves” in one manner or another, often with a persuasive purpose. For most people, this is an unexamined feeling, part of many cultures’ folk psychologies. Yet Nienkamp’s work shows how often the idea has been examined and written
about by philosophers as far back as Isocrates (18) and Plato (29). In the 20th century, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca discuss “inward deliberation” involving “at least two interlocutors” (14; see also Nienkamp 84). In A Rhetoric of Motives, Burke envisions a whole “parliament” within the mind in which “rival factions” make and counter claims (38; see also Nienkamp 100).

In building her theory, Nienkamp posits two types of internal rhetoric, primary and cultivated. Primary “goes on virtually all the time in our subconscious minds” and is a naturally occurring internalization of social language practices (127). Cultivated internal rhetoric is what we think of as talking to ourselves; Nienkamp describes it as an “art” (xii) “which rises to consciousness when circumstances warrant” (125-26). This communication, she theorizes, occurs within a “rhetorical self . . . made up of a colloquy of internalized social languages, interacting rhetorically to adapt attitude and behavior to personal, cultural and environmental demands” (127). In Nienkamp’s model, the rhetorical self is strongly influenced by social norms via internal rhetoric, yet internal rhetoric’s deliberative and hortative features also give the self the means to modify and resist such pressures (126). As such, Nienkamp offers internal rhetoric as a bridge between traditional rhetoric’s view of a unified, intentional, persuasive self and the postmodern view of a conflicted, unaware, socially determined self. Nienkamp’s rhetorical self both acts and is acted upon via internal rhetorics. As she puts it, “(E)ach human being is a site of both rhetorical dissension and concerted rhetorical action” (127).

In many ways, Murray’s writing process aligns with Nienkamp’s model. His writer’s learning to listen to the voices of self, other self and text can be seen as a special instance of her cultivated internal rhetoric. Her rhetorical self is consistent with his image of the writer dealing with sometimes-conflicting advice from various internal “voices,” pushing the writing toward a desired goal yet often leaving the writer surprised where it ends up. Her internalized social influences may act, on a conscious level, through at least two of the internal influences he identified. First, the other self, the censor who is “the writer’s first reader,” embodies the writer’s conception of audience and, more generally, society. When the censor says a bit of writing works or doesn’t work, it is the writer’s preconceived, perhaps subconscious, notion of the audience’s view that is talking. (We know it isn’t the writer’s own view because the judgment would change depending on audience; the censor makes different decisions about language in a letter to a lover than in a term paper for a professor.) The second way that social influences are manifested in Murray’s writing process is in the form of the “companion readers” who show up as he writes. Murray describes them as encouraging and appreciative, which is one form of influence. Yet it is also easy to imagine Murray looking up from his writing and seeing the disapproval he saw so often as a child. Either way, the characters within Murray’s aloneness certainly provide opportunities for Nienkamp’s internalized societal influences to be voiced.
There is one way in which Murray’s aloneness in writing doesn’t immediately seem to fit within Nienkamp’s model. For Nienkamp, internal rhetorics are as her title suggests: self-persuasion. Her study is about “the persuasive techniques we use on ourselves” (ix). Yet Murray does not describe the writer’s internal discussion as involving persuasion (in the most common sense of that term). Picture his analogy of self and other self as “two workmen muttering to each other at the workbench.” We imagine such workers cooperating, deliberating, evaluating, criticizing—taking various actions to move their work forward—but generally not trying to persuade each other. Extending Murray’s metaphor, it is as if each writing session is a shift in a factory. The workers show up. In the experienced writer, they have worked together before, and they know their own jobs and what their co-worker does. Their common task is to construct meaning from raw information, then send it out the door as communication packaged in some sort of text. As they build the text, its evolving shape increasingly limits what the workers can do further with it—yet, again, its growing influence does not seem to involve persuasion. Murray’s “companion readers” watch this process, evaluating and thus influencing it, yet they do not speak. If he sees their role as persuasive, would they remain silent? Murray depicts this interplay of forces more as rational deliberation than as persuasion, which fits with his general view of writing as “after all, a rational act” (“Teaching the Other Self” 143).

Yet this surface disparity need not prevent us from identifying Murray’s inner writing process as a different perspective on Nienkamp’s internal rhetorics. Certainly, today’s view that rhetoric is a function of all language use would encompass deliberation and decision-making. Within cultivated rhetoric, Nienkamp specifically includes “reasoning through choices and dilemmas presented to us on a daily basis” as an example of “intentional (self-) persuasion toward a desired end” (4). She even uses a composition example (“a writer trying to decide whether to approach her next sentence one way or another – or to take a break and eat chocolate” [4]) in illustrating how primary and cultivated rhetoric are both present in many internal deliberations. Finally, let us juxtapose the acknowledged subjectivity of Murray’s philosophy of writing against the frequently subconscious nature of Nienkamp’s primary internal rhetoric. He is reporting that the inner communication about writing feels rational and logical. Her model allows this conception in the foreground even as self-persuasion by internalized social influences happens in the background. Thus, I propose that her theory of internal rhetorics explains and situates his view of the composing process, just as his view provides subjective testimony regarding the importance of internal rhetorics in the composing process.

Re-Labeling Murray

As I said above, my objectives include better understanding of Murray and perhaps complicating him—at least convincing compositionists to re-
examine the work he produced and the labels they have put on it. Specifically, I disagree with the implications of two of those labels.

Stephen M. North, who in his *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* offers a useful taxonomy of knowledge-makers in the discipline, labels Murray as a composition practitioner (341) rather than any type of scholar or researcher. What does this label mean? North devotes a chapter to the way practitioners relate to knowledge of their craft; his description is not unsympathetic, but it is not flattering, either. “Practitioners are regarded essentially as technicians: Scholars and especially Researchers make knowledge; Practitioners apply it,” he writes (21). The main type of knowledge that they contribute is what North (and others) call lore: “the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs in terms of which Practitioners understand how writing is done, learned, and taught” (22). In explaining his use of the term, North indicates he is not adopting lore’s “negative, even denigrative connotations” involving wizards, herbal healers, witches, and alchemy, and he writes that it is “driven by a pragmatic logic” (23). Yet he proposes that lore has three central functional properties that are quite illogical: “literally anything can become a part of lore” (24); “nothing can ever be dropped from it” (24); and, whenever practitioners adopt knowledge from their own ranks or from researchers or scholars, they “will make it over in a way that suits their needs” (25). In other words, the practitioner community to which North assigns Murray can come to believe anything, will not stop believing something that has been proven wrong, and probably cannot be trusted to apply legitimate knowledge without mucking it up.

Let me say first that I do not agree with this description of practitioners or of the way they make and use knowledge. More to the point in this paper, I do not agree that Murray should be labeled only as a practitioner who happens to write. As I hope to have shown above, Murray’s lifetime research agenda was to learn as much as he could about how writing happened and how it might be taught. His primary method in this quest was examining, questioning, and recording what seemed to happen in his own mind as he wrote. Such research is both experiential and phenomenological, and certainly cannot be assumed to be generalizable—yet it does build knowledge that should not be dismissed as lore.

Murray also has been tagged with the “process” label, and of course the tag applies. However, I disagree that one common post-process criticism of the process movement applies at all to Murray. This is the knock that the movement assumes the existence of some generalized writing process, and that if we study this process enough we can produce composition instruction that always works. As Gary A. Olson puts it:

The problem with process theory, then, is . . . that [process scholars] are endeavoring (consciously or not) to construct a model of the composing process, thereby constructing a Theory of Writing, a series of generalizations about writing that supposedly hold true all or most of the time. . . . This is what Thomas Kent and other post-process theorists mean when
they complain that process scholars . . . are attempting to systematize something that simply is not susceptible to systematization. (8)

Again, I am not convinced that this is a valid general criticism of the process movement, but I am quite sure that it does not apply to Murray. Yes, he thought writing processes should be the central focus of our research and scholarship, and that those processes should be studied in many ways. Yet his entire body of work is based on a rejection of the idea that writing is in any way systematic or predictable. Its unpredictability is why, after decades of successful writing, he declares in *My Twice-Lived Life* that he still considers himself an “apprentice” (29) to the craft and still feels “the terror of the blank page” (76). This is why he moves away from knowledge-dispensing lectures to a one-on-one pedagogy in which he first listens to the student to learn where she finds herself in a particular writing project, and only then suggests what might help.

**Classroom Possibilities**

I suggest there are two ways that a more thorough understanding of Murray’s aloneness can be useful for writing teachers. First, by emphasizing the disciplined agenda for this solitude, and the work that must precede it, teachers can ensure that students appreciate the rigor that writing entails. A process-focused course needn’t be, as Tobin lists in a summary of the critiques of process, “too soft, too touchy-feely, too student-directed to do its job: teach students how to write” (11). And an expressivist course can encourage voice and agency yet stop short of underwriting what Covino calls “unfettered (and by some lights, unlettered) self-expression” (37). For students who would attempt writing before they’ve learned enough about subject, genre, and context, Murray’s model shows the missing element: knowledge gained through effort. For others who have gathered the raw materials yet are frustrated because they don’t simply fall together on the page, his model shows how to proceed: writing, then reading; switching between self and other self; watching the text take shape and listening to what it learns to say. Second, Murray’s experiential descriptions of what goes on in a writer’s mind, combined with Nienkamp’s theoretical work, can provide a starting point and some useful terms for classroom conversations about issues of social context. Here, I agree with Gradin that an expressivist writing class needn’t be politically naïve, that it can help students become aware “of how the self is socially shaped” (115). Toward that end, classroom discussion of Murray’s self, other self and companion readers, and of Nienkamp’s internal rhetorics, can focus on what these phenomena represent, how they influence a writer, and how the writer might resist.

**Final Notes**

While I contend Murray’s ideas about the aloneness of writing have real value in the composition course, I also think he was wrong in letting those
ideas lead him to a pedagogy in which the class rarely met. It is not that Murray saw no value in classroom interaction; it is just that he saw more value in student-instructor conversations. As valuable as those conversations might be, a pedagogy ignoring other interaction is stunted. It denies students the chance to participate in conversations with each other that can include just as much surprise and discovery as writing does. Murray's move to a conference-only course seems inconsistent with his own oft-stated belief that students are real writers. If they are, can't they work with and learn from each other? Wouldn't such interaction be valuable practice for a lifetime of writing outside class? The best writing instruction, I think, would feature both student-teacher conferences and class meetings that allow the type of "dialogic/collaborative interaction" with each other that Kent advocates ("Paralogic Hermeneutics" 38).

Still, I feel Murray was right in seeing a "fundamental aloneness" in writing. Since the social turn, our discipline has shifted its primary focus from, in Patricia Bizzell's terms, "inner-directed" to "outer-directed" theorizing (215, 217). I believe this redirection was necessary, and one of the many good results that came from it was identification of just how socially influenced writing is. Yet, as Bizzell points out, writing is both inner and outer. Nothing gets written without context, but nothing gets written without cognition, either. And these are not two independent universes: context and cognition interact whenever we write. Understanding this interaction, and discussing it with our students, is a worthwhile undertaking for composition scholars—teachers. Murray's aloneness—with its self and other self, texts that talk and think, and ghosts that watch from the shadows—can help with that.

Works Cited


